THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

WATER TO WINE

January 18, 1998
John M. Buchanan

O God, who brought me from the rest of last night
To the new light of this day
Bring me in the new light of this day
To the guiding light of the eternal
Lead me, O God on the journey of justice
Guide me, O God on the pathways of peace
Renew me, O god by the wellsprings of grace
Today, tonight and forever.

J. Philip Newell
Celtic Prayers From Iona

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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WATER TO WINE

1 Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory..." John 2:11

O God, slow us down now so we can hear the word you have for us. Quiet our minds and our spirits. Open our hearts so we can know something of your love for us and for our neighbors and for the whole creation. In Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

* * *

Ministers love the Cana wedding story because after a while in this business you see everything that can go wrong at a wedding go wrong: the ushers, so casual and blase at rehearsal having no idea on the wedding day what their responsibilities are; the maid of honor's dress left behind in a motel out at O'Hare; the groom is late; the mother of the bride and mother of the groom aren't speaking; the soloist doesn't show; the flower girl refuses to walk down the aisle; the groom keeps stumbling over his lines, puts the ring on the wrong hand, faints; the bride can't say her vows for weeping or giggling. When clergy get together, one of the things we often talk about are things that go wrong at weddings.

Sometimes ministers are the cause of the disaster. Sometimes we forget our lines or get the names wrong, or mispronounce the name, or forget to write the names in the little service book. "I now declare before God and this congregation that William Robert Smith and ... this woman standing here ... are husband and wife."

One of the blessings of being the pastor of this church is that I can "go one better" with almost anyone because of our two "media" weddings. The rehearsal and wedding scenes in *My Best Friend's Wedding* were filmed here and everyone wants to know how it was and did I meet Julia Roberts and how much money were we paid. It took about eight days for about two minutes in the movie. The flowers were replaced every day, the sanctuary was air conditioned and full of lights, cameras, booms, miles of cables and of course, full of people from dawn till midnight: technicians, helpers, a sanctuary full of extras dressed elegantly. It was a major nuisance for our staff but it was worth a lot of good stories.

The other media wedding never took place, but was the absolute fictional creation of *The Globe*, one of those grocery store check-out line tabloids that masquerade as a newspaper. In June 1993 *The Globe*, which is published in Montreal and whose editorial office is in Boca Raton, Florida, announced that Oprah was going to be married, and married at Fourth Church, and there we were, on the front page, full pictures of Fourth Church, inside and out, the wedding invitation inset. Jesse Jackson was to be the presiding minister, Whitney Houston, I recall, was the soloist. It was, of course, a total fabrication, but it makes a great story. We failed to see the humor of it at the time, in fact became a little indignant; we even talked to some lawyers. The best part of the story was that the day *The Globe* hit the newsstands, or the check-out lines, more accurately, I

was flying to Orlando for a meeting of the General Assembly. At the end of the flight, as we descended into Orlando, my seat-mate put her lap-top away and I closed my book and she struck up a conversation. Sooner or later it got around to the inevitable, "and what do you do?"

"I'm a minister," I said, "and what do you do?"
"I'm an attorney," she said.
"With a Chicago firm?" I asked.
"No," she said, "I work for a newspaper."
"Oh," I said, having just talked to attorneys. "And what do you do for the newspaper?"
"My job," she said, "is to keep them from being sued and defend them when they are."

I was pretty interested at this point.

"What newspaper do you work for?"
"You probably never heard of it. It's published in Montreal," she said.
"Try me," I said.
"It's *The Globe*," she said.
"Oh," I said, as I reopened my briefcase and pulled out *The Globe* with the picture of Fourth Presbyterian Church on the front. "I'm the minister of that church," I said.

Her precise response, I recall, was "Oh, my God!"

By that time we were pulling into the gate and she gathered her belongings and without another word, sprinted off the plane.

I love the story of Jesus at the wedding at Cana, the wedding where the wine ran out before the reception was over. It is told only in the fourth gospel, at the very beginning of the story. It sets the scene for all that will follow.

It is an odd story. Unlike most of Jesus' miracles, the blind are not given sight, the lame healed, the dead raised. Cana was a small village, nine miles north of Nazareth. "There was a wedding." It's a very major event, actually. It begins with a procession through the village streets of family and friends escorting the bride to the groom's house for a banquet. All the relatives are there, neighbors, friends. Mary and Jesus and his disciples are also there, nine miles away from home. Some scholars suggest that Mary and the groom's mother must have been related. The celebration continues for a week. There's a lot of eating and drinking and laughing and story-telling, toasting and well-wishing, children playing with cousins and new friends – not unlike what transpires at the round of showers, and the rehearsal dinner and reception for a contemporary wedding, except that this is a very serious party which continues for a week.

Custom dictated that invited guests bring wine to help the groom's family. Someone suggests that Jesus and his entourage didn't bring any wine and that it is their presence which precipitates the crisis. Whatever the cause, it is a major disaster. The wine is gone and the guests aren't. My guess is that the father and mother of the groom are looking for someone to blame and have

chosen each other. The groom is furious, the bride embarrassed. It's a big problem and so Mary says to her son, in effect, "it would be nice if you could do something about it."

Norman Mailer has written a book, *The Gospel According to the Son*, which tells the story in the voice of Jesus. He sets the context for this story as a disagreement Jesus had with his mother about his future plans. Mary, the way Mailer tells it, wants Jesus to join the desert community at Qumran, to be a desert preacher and mystic, like his cousin John, dressed in a hair shirt, eating locusts and honey.

At the wedding, Mary tells Jesus about the wine running out.

There were six large stoneware jars – used to hold water for the household's ritual bathing and purification. At Jesus' instruction the jars were filled with water and when the steward sampled it, the jars were found to contain wine, very good wine. Without interruption, the celebration continued.

In Mailer's account, Jesus reflects:

> "I felt near to the kingdom of God. For now I knew that this kingdom was composed of much beauty. My Father was not only the God of wrath but could offer tenderness as gentle as the concern that rests in the touch of one's hand." [p. 61]

What happened? The story doesn't say. The story doesn't seem to care about the question we want to ask. It's a sign, the first sign Jesus performed, the writer says. What he did "revealed his glory," John says. The disciples believed in him.

C.S. Lewis puts it in proper perspective in his little book *Miracles*.

> "Every year, as part of the natural order, God makes wine. God does so by creating a vegetable organism that can turn water, soil and sunlight into a juice which will, under proper conditions, become wine. God constantly turns water into wine. The miracle consists in a short cut." [*Miracles*, p. 141]

Poet Wendell Berry says the same thing:

> "Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence ... will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine – which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes."

I love this story. I love it because it says our Lord's public ministry begins at a wonderful human celebration and not at a more conventional and expected place – like the synagogue or temple.

It's about people living life fully, passionately, joyfully, and Jesus helping them do it. It's about a party, not a strategic planning meeting.

Distinguished New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, in his classic study of the Gospel of John remarks, dryly,

> "Many feel uneasy with the implications that Jesus changed 120 gallons of water into wine."

You bet.

I love the fact that Jesus graces this wonderfully human occasion with his presence and by his gracious act seems to be saying: "treasure this moment – treasure all those moments in life which speak of the beauty and glory of the gift of life. Don't waste your time – don't miss the beauty and the glory. Cherish moments of love, experiences of passion. Cherish the gift of love and sex and food and drink and laughter. God's love for you is meant to enhance and enrich and deepen your living of life in the same way that the wine enhances the wedding celebration."

Soren Kierkegaard said somewhere that while Jesus turned water into wine, his followers seem determined to turn wine back into water.

I love the fact that according to the fourth gospel, Jesus begins to reveal God to his people – not in a religious place, not reciting the religious law or performing a religious ritual, but by providing for a celebration of life to continue. I find in that a word for his church today, a word of instruction and a word of judgment.

I attended a church meeting this week that I found depressing. It was a meeting at which about 400 Presbyterian clergy and lay people were doing what we do mostly these days when we meet and that is argue about sex and sexual sin and sexual responsibility and rules and guidelines and constitutional provisions, and about what the Bible says and means and about who is allowed to be ordained, above all else.

I don't want to bore anyone with this – but it is what is happening in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I am involved in this issue and you deserve to know how and why.

Two years ago the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) put in its constitution a provision which would deny ordination as a minister, elder or deacon to any person who does not live either in faithfulness, fidelity, in marriage or chastity in singleness. Last year, after a year of talking and arguing, the General Assembly passed a provision to replace "fidelity and chastity" with "fidelity and integrity" -- Amendment A. Along with a group of colleagues I respect and admire, I helped to form an organization, The Covenant Network of Presbyterians, to work for the adoption of Amendment A by a majority of our church's 172 presbyteries. Currently, Amendment A is losing by a margin of 12 to 9.

I have not brought this matter directly into the pulpit and I do not intend to again, but I am today because of our text and because of that church meeting last Tuesday night when 400 Presbyterian clergy and lay persons met in Oak Park to talk about and vote on Amendment A. Our Presbytery passed it by a margin of 257 to 165. The Session of this church voted to urge the Presbytery to pass it. The clergy staff of this church unanimously endorse Amendment A.

The issue before the church is an important one: what constitutes faithful, responsible intimate behavior. But the issue behind all the discussion is whether or not gay and lesbian persons shall be ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Those who oppose it do so primarily on the basis of what, for them, is a clear Biblical mandate. For some of us, the Biblical mandate is not clear. For others of us, the Biblical mandate is in the direction of openness and inclusivity and it seems quite clear. I am one of those. I believe in heterosexual marriage, faithfulness in marriage. I believe the church needs to affirm marriage and teach and encourage responsible sexual behavior for all people. But I do not believe scripture mandates the exclusion of everyone who, for one reason or another, does not live within those norms. And I do not personally believe scripture mandates the exclusion from leadership in our church of faithful gay and lesbian Presbyterians, who are faithful to one another, honest and just in all their relationships, and devoted to following Jesus Christ.

I know what the Bible says about unnatural passion, and women lying with women and men lying with men. I also know my forebears turned to scripture and what seemed to be clear scriptural mandates to support slavery, segregation and to deny ordination to women. I know what Jesus said about divorce and remarriage; clearly, unequivocally that remarriage is adultery. Not so long ago, divorce was reason enough to ask a minister to demit. But in all of these areas the church has changed the way it interpreted and implemented what scripture says. We Presbyterians decided that not only would Jesus not condemn all divorce, and refuse remarriage, but would bless it as a redemptive, wonderful gift of a loving God.

I believe it is time to change the way we interpret scripture in this matter. I do not advocate promiscuity or infidelity. I do advocate a new openness to what I believe the Holy Spirit is calling the church to do in this matter of who can be ordained.

I also can and will live in a church where there is a diversity of opinion on this matter. We do not all have to agree in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or in this congregation. I do not respect or love any less the persons who do not agree with me. But I can no longer not declare where I am and where I believe God calls me to be.

I'm sorry my church spends so much time arguing about this. I deplore the arguing and unkindness and moral arrogance that accompanies the debate – not because I don't agree with the arguments but because I believe it embarrasses Jesus and because it turns his church into something I think Jesus came to deliver us from – a religious institution which cares more about restrictions than grace; an institution known more for who it excludes in the name of morality than who it includes because of his love.

I long for the day when 400 Presbyterians will show up at a meeting to talk about God's amazing unconditional love, or the sin of violence against God's beautiful creation, for instance, about children killing children in Cabrini Green or the Robert Taylor Homes. I long for the day when we Presbyterians can get exercised about economic injustice, health care, education, mission in the world, instead of who gets ordained. I long for a church which can generate passion about life's goodness and God's amazing grace and the incredible, unconditional, unlikely, shocking, almost outrageous generosity of Jesus Christ.

When the Presbyterian Church gathered in General Assembly in Syracuse last June, it was my happy responsibility to invite persons to preach each day at opening worship. One I invited was Frederick Buechner, best-selling author, very popular writer of fiction, poetry, sermons, biography, theology, and a Presbyterian minister. He graciously accepted my invitation, came to Syracuse and preached an unforgettable sermon, for which he was condemned by people on the right wing who do not want our church to ordain homosexual persons, or even to appear sympathetic or understanding. I have been criticized, and continue to be, for inviting him.

I'd like to tell you what Frederick Buechner said. He said that it is the will of Jesus Christ that we, all of us, live life... "live it by falling in love with it, and not so much by worrying about it and talking about it but by letting it fill our sails like the wind."

Buechner talked about living as friends, who despite all our differences, delight in one another, rejoicing in our variety and how that's what God wants of us. "Be friends at a deeper level even than we are adversaries," he said.

And then he told a story that got him in a lot of hot water. I thought it was a good and true story and so I will read it as Buechner told it.

> "Last spring my wife and I went to what amounted to a wedding although the word used in the invitation was not wedding but celebration – a celebration of love and commitment, the invitation said. The reason the word wedding was not used was that the couple in question were not a man and a woman but two women. One of them was a childhood friend of our youngest daughter whom we had known since she was five years old or so, a pig-tailed, freckled-face, plump little thing who grew up to become in her thirties a warm-hearted, spontaneous, out-going kind of woman who has had great success as a teacher and coach at a secondary school near where we live. The other, her friend, was a year or two older, an intelligent, well-educated woman who seems more reserved at first but is full of the same kind of wit and strength and human warmth when you get to know her.
>
> "It is hard to convey the mixed feelings I had when the invitation arrived. With part of myself, I could only rejoice not only that two people I liked and admired had each found in the other a companion she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, but that instead of keeping it as a guilty secret between them, they were prepared to stand up and declare it in the midst of a small town that they

surely knew could no more be depended upon to view it with universal tolerance and understanding than any small town anywhere in this country or anywhere else.

"With part of myself, I found it hard to believe that Jesus himself would do anything but bless a commitment as honest and brave as the one they were making to each other. The Bible has hard things to say about homosexuality in the sense of prostitution and lust and exploitation – just as it has equally hard things to say about heterosexuality in the sense of prostitution and lust and exploitation – but about homosexuality in the sense of the kind of loving, faithful, monogamous relationship that these two women were entering upon, it seems to leave it to us to search our own hearts, and with part of my own heart I was nothing but happy for them and wished them nothing but well.

"But that was with only part of my heart. With the other part I was afraid for these two people and ambivalent in all sorts of ways about what they were doing and confused by my own ambivalence. I am as much the product of my own generation with all its prejudices and preconceptions and limitations as anybody else, and I couldn't help wishing that things had turned out differently for them. I wished my daughter's childhood friend had found a man to fall in love with and to have babies with the way my daughter had. I wished that in a world that God knows is dangerous and complicated enough as it is she and her friend had chosen a safer, simpler, more well-marked path, and as I thought ahead to the celebration we were bidden to, I couldn't help believing that a great many others – the parents, the friends, everybody who loved them – probably wished the same thing. So with all this going on inside me, I went to the ceremony full of misgivings. I felt awkward and divided inside myself. I felt awkward about what to say when I got there, about what to think, about what to be....

"The ceremony took place outside on the lawn in front of the house of the parents of my daughter's friend. There was the usual milling around and chatting while we waited for the musicians to arrive. There was a tent set up for the reception. It had been threatening rain, but the sun came out at the last minute. The service was conducted by a minister and his wife whom most of us knew. There was a homily based on the words of Ruth to Naomi –'Whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried.' Vows were exchanged, and the couple embraced, and the minister blessed them.

"How to describe such an occasion in Vermont of all places and in the presence of some people who looked right out of Norman Rockwell.... How to guess what they felt about what they were there to witness except that probably no two of them felt quite the same way? But there was one feeling that I am as certain as you can be about such things that we all shared, and that was the feeling that something honest and loving and brave was happening before our eyes, and that something kind and affirming and hopeful was happening inside ourselves, and

> that grace, never more amazingly, was somehow in the very air we breathed. In other words, for a few moments that summer afternoon it seemed to me that we were what I believe the church was created to be. I heard it and saw it and touched it."

And at the end of the story, Buechner said something else that really got him in trouble. He said:

> "For many years now I have taken to going to church less and less because I find so little there of what I hunger for. It is a sense of the presence of God that I hunger for. It is grace that I hunger for – as it seemed almost palpable at that off-beat little celebration in Vermont, the faith and hope and charity of it, the sense that no matter what our various misgivings were about what was being celebrated, we were all of us truly friends in Christ there, and Christ was truly our friend and the friend as well of the two young women who were being blessed in his name."

Buechner concluded by saying to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),

> "I know nothing about the churches you come from. Maybe grace abounds there. I pray that is so. Maybe the passion of your preachers hasn't gotten somehow lost in the ecclesiastical shuffle."

I am ready for us to move on: to respect one another's differences of opinion, to trust one another to make faithful personal decisions about our most personal and intimate relationships; I am ready for Presbyterians to trust sessions and congregations to make faithful decisions about who is elected to leadership. I am ready for us to remember why we are here, why, in the first place, we fell in love with Jesus and with his courage and hope. I'm ready for us to be a church that cherishes the gift of life and celebrates with great joy and laughter his generosity and unconditional love and amazing grace.

He made 120 gallons of good wine. That is generosity. That is grace. That is the only way you and I or anyone else for that matter gets into the kingdom: his generosity and grace. No matter who we are, we are at God's banquet table because Jesus invites us to be there and receives us and welcomes us – all of us.

> "There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee...Jesus and his disciples had also been invited.... Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him."

Thanks be to God. Amen.